

THE CAUSES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR.

THE GREAT POWERS IN 1914.

THE CENTRAL POWERS. (ITALY, GERMANY and AUSTRIA-HUNGARY).

GERMANY.

Germany was made up of many small states that had united and **become one country in 1871.**

Led by Prussia, which was then the most powerful of these small German states, they had managed to do this by fighting a series of successful wars against Denmark, Austria and France.

Otto von Bismarck was Chancellor of the newly united Germany and he believed that he could solve all the problems with military strength.

Germany could afford to support a large and Well-equipped army because of the success of its industry. By 1900 Germany's industrial output had overtaken Britain's, and was second only to that of the USA. Kaiser Wilhelm the second wanted to make Germany the leading country in Europe. In **1890** he **dismissed Bismarck** for being too cautious. The Kaiser was determined to build up the navy and win an empire for Germany which could rival the Britain's.

AUSTRIA-HUNGARY.

The empire of Austria-Hungary was Germany's oldest ally. The Emperor Franz Josef ruled over this large and ancient empire, made up of many different peoples: Germans, Austrians, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Italians, Serbs, Croats, Poles and others.

German was the language of government, but each group spoke its own language and had its own customs. This made the empire very difficult to rule. Many of these people were demanding their independence.

At the same time Franz Josef and his government were keen to take over even more land in the Balkans.

In Germany, the Kaiser had ambitions to build a railway all the way from Berlin to Baghdad. He supported the Austrians in their Balkan plans. Germany and Austria-Hungary had been joined together in the **Dual Alliance** since **1879.**

FRANCE.

France had been terribly defeated by Germany in 1870 in the Franco-Prussian war and one of its aims since then was revenge.

France was building up its industrial strength but at a slower progress compared to Germany. So France knew that it would need allies as well as resources if it were to defeat Germany.

When Kaiser Wilhelm dismissed Bismarck in 1890, he took charge of foreign policy himself. He did not keep up the Russian alliance. France was quick to make a treaty of friendship with Russia two years later.

RUSSIA.

Russia was by far the largest of the Great Powers in area and in population. Its lands and people stretched from Eastern Europe into Asia. By 1900, this vast country had made little progress compared to Germany, Britain and France. After the alliance of 1892 French money helped to pay for some new industry. Most Russians still lived as peasants in thousands of Russian villages. The ruler of Russia, the Tsar, was in complete personal control of the country.

BRITAIN.

In the 19th century Britain was the 'workshop of the world'. Its industrial goods were traded all over the world. By the turn of the century, the British lead was being challenged by Germany, France and the USA, but Britain was still a great trading nation. It still had the largest merchant fleet in the world.

Britain held this vast empire together with its navy, the strongest in the world. The British attitude to Europe had long been clear of European alliances, secure in the strength of its empire, its industry and its navy.

When the British government began to look for allies in Europe it seemed sensible, at first, to join the Central Powers against France and Russia. Germany's royal family was very closely linked with Britain's. France was an old enemy and a rival in Africa.

Russia was Britain's rival in the East, especially over Afghanistan. But an alliance with the Central Powers involved Austria-Hungary, with whom Britain had nothing in common.

Gradually, it became clear to the British government that the Kaiser's naval and colonial plans for Germany were a far greater threat to Britain's position than were Russia or France. The differences with France were settled, and in 1904 the 'Entente Cordiale' was signed between Britain and France. The next year, a war which was being fought between Japan and Russia ended in a Russian defeat, Britain believed it no longer had anything to fear from Russia in the East.

In 1907 therefore a Triple Entente was signed between Britain, France and Russia. This Triple Entente was not a very firm alliance, not as firm as the Dual Alliance of Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Tension and rivalry increased. Armies were drilled and war plan prepared.

NAVAL RIVALRY. DREADNOUGHTS.

Germany and Britain began a race to expand their navies as fast as possible. In 1906 Britain launched HMS Dreadnought. This battleship had heavier guns and thicker armour-plating and was faster than any other battleship in the world. It made all other warships out-of-date. Immediately, the Kaiser ordered his shipyards to produce a German version.

Two years later Germany announced that it would build four Dreadnought-type warships each year.

MOROCCO.

The Kaiser tested the Britain-France alliance in two incidents involving Morocco on the North African coast. Britain and France had agreed that they must control the Mediterranean between them. Britain was powerful in the eastern Mediterranean and France in the western Mediterranean. In **1905** the Kaiser visited Morocco to throw the French out of the western Mediterranean.

Britain and France stuck together and the Kaiser had to back down.

In **1911**, the Kaiser sent a gunboat to Morocco. He hoped to force France and Britain to allow him to expand his German territories in Central Africa. Again he was forced to withdraw.

THE BALKANS.

The Ottoman or Turkish empire had once covered all the Balkans. By 1900 Greece, Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia had won their freedom from the Ottoman rule.

The Ottoman empire in Europe was now small. Two rivals came to fill the gap: Austria-Hungary (backed by Germany) and Russia.

The Balkans looked to Russia for help. Russia wanted to be sure that the channel which gave it a sea route to the Mediterranean, did not fall into enemy hands. Russia supported independence and expansion for the Balkan states.

If the Slavs in the Balkans became independent, the Slavs and others peoples inside Austria-Hungary would want independence. If that happened, Austria-Hungary would collapse.

Serbia had plans to create a country of the 'Southern Slavs' which would contain all the Slavs south of Austria.

In order to stop Serbian expansion to the west, Austria-Hungary took over Bosnia in 1908. Since many of the people in Bosnia were Slavs, this action greatly annoyed the Serbs. Several secret societies were formed in Serbia whose members were dedicated to throwing the Austrians out of the Balkans. One of these societies was called the 'Black Hand'.

In 1912, Greece, Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria attacked the Ottomans and drove them out of most of the Balkans. The area was divided up again in 1913, enlarging Serbia, making it even more determined to be leader of the Slav people in both the Balkans and Austria-Hungary.

Naturally, Austria-Hungary was annoyed by this and wanted to teach Serbia a lesson. Russia, of course, backed Serbia.

Assassination at Sarajevo.

Amidst all the tension created by this situation, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand visited Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia. He was assassinated by Gavrilo Princip, a member of the Black Hand organisation.

From then on, the countries of Europe, one by one, slid into war. Germany offered to support Austria-Hungary if it came to war. This encouraged Austria-Hungary to give Serbia a tough ultimatum. It demanded that Serbia should accept Austrian control in running Serbia or else Austria would declare war. Serbia agreed to all but one of the demands. Russia offered to help Serbia and began to mobilise — that is, get ready for war. This was intended to be a bluff, but Austria went ahead and declared war on Serbia on 28 July 1914.

Germany was worried by Russian mobilisation: German war plans relied on Russia being slow to get ready for war. The Germans dared not let their time advantage over Russia slip away. All their plans were based on attacking France through Belgium first.

On 1 August, Germany declared war on Russia and on 3 August, on France. German troops entered Belgium. With Britain's allies at war and German troops across the Channel, Britain stood by its 1839 agreement to protect Belgium if it were attacked. Britain declared war on the Central Powers on 4 August 1914.